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# State of the Art

## bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis on Race, Ethnicity, Class and Gender

Marianne Grünell and Sawitri Saharso

FREE UNIVERSITY, AMSTERDAM

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The wicked triangle of race, class and gender was at the heart of our discussion with bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis. In the autumn of 1997 both women lectured in Amsterdam on 'the linking of gender and ethnicity in an alternative policy perspective'. Their presence offered a unique opportunity for our State of the Art series, allowing us to bring together two celebrated and controversial thinkers on race, class, ethnicity and gender. bell hooks is a writer and distinguished professor of English at Harlem's City College in New York. Nira Yuval-Davis – a social scientist, educated at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Sussex University in the UK – is a professor of gender and ethnic studies at the University of Greenwich in the UK. It was a conversation, as it turned out, that was at times more like a debate than a formal interview. As the subjects discussed were, for all attendants, of more than just academic relevance and as both authors have shown in their work a great personal and political commitment to these subjects, it was to be expected that controversies and differences of perspective would arise. They did and we have not tried to sweep them under the carpet, because we believe that the subjects concerned are better served by open debate than by suggesting consensus.

For bell hooks, whose *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (hooks, 1981) met with enthusiastic response not only in the USA but also

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in Western Europe, reporting personal experiences is of paradigmatic importance. It is this conviction that underpins her personal courage; it also explains why she represents an – at times controversial – challenge for other thinkers. Her work is a constant reminder of her position as an intellectual who is prepared to point out the fallacies of the groups she is committed to: be it the white dominance in the feminist movement; male dominance in the black movement; or the subjectless-ness in academia. She constantly questions theoretical notions based on her own experiences and tries to capture these experiences in theoretical reflections. This has brought her to develop new theoretical concepts – such as the notion of ‘white supremacy’ rather than ‘racism’ – that she thinks are more able to tackle the conceptual problems surrounding the triangle of race, class and gender. In doing so, she makes use of different literary styles, including (academic) prose, poetry and essays.

Consciousness raising – or more precisely, decolonization of the minds of the oppressed – is central in her oeuvre, to which she has added many books and articles covering fields like culture and representation, education and self-recovery, the feminist movement and politics since 1981 (hooks, 1984, 1989, 1992, 1994). The choice of her pseudonym ‘bell hooks’ also contains a clue to the dedication in her work. ‘bell hooks’ was her great-grandmother’s name. She assumed it as a tribute to the black working-class women who showed tremendous strength by surviving, but who nevertheless became invisible figures whose names were obliterated by history. At the time of our discussion, she had just finished a project on writing as a means to recover black women’s voices from the past and to ensure that the work of important black women writers, like Audre Lorde, Pat Barker or Toni Cade Banberrá, is not forgotten.

As far as women’s studies are concerned, for bell hooks, ‘the most revolutionary thing that happened, at least in the US, was the inclusion of difference. The work that emerged from that inclusion has been the most enabling and empowering for women in general. And to me it affirms that if we look at the dilemmas of women who are not white, not privileged, etc., these will often shed light on the overall understanding of what is happening generally with women – for instance with regards to public policy. If you use this approach, people don’t think: let’s focus on this group in some exclusive way because these people are different. But instead: let’s focus on this group as a way of illuminating a general understanding of what is happening in the culture as a whole.’

Nira Yuval-Davis’s central areas of interest are nationalism, fundamentalism and gender relations and questions of citizenship and difference. Originally, she was engaged in struggles for civil rights and against racism and sexism in Israel and against the Israeli occupation of the territories conquered in 1967. In 1983 she published an article with Floya Anthias that was heavily debated both inside and outside the UK. In it

they proposed a constructionist approach in which gender, class and ethnicity were understood as mutually constitutive and historically variable social divisions. But as the 1980s were the heydays of identity politics, in which the common understanding was that social groups were to organize along the lines of their common identity, this notion appeared to undermine the unitary categories that formed the organizational basis of various movements.

Nira Yuval-Davis is also one of the organizers of Women Against Fundamentalism (WAF). WAF, founded in 1989, recognizes the fact that the values of fundamentalists of whatever religion are very often detrimental to women; fundamentalism in all major religions constitutes one of the most important – and dangerous – social movements in all parts of the contemporary world. From the start WAF directed itself against all forms of religious fundamentalism and against all forms of racism. However, as in Britain Muslim fundamentalists themselves belong to an oppressed racial minority, it makes it extremely difficult to find an enabling political strategy to combat this form of fundamentalism without playing into the hands of racist groups. WAF members' reflections on how to bite this particular bullet are to be found in *Refusing Holy Orders* (1992), a book Nira Yuval-Davis co-edited with Gita Saghal. Her most recently published book at the time of the interview was *Gender and Nation* (1997), a book in which she argues that the construction of nationhood involves specific notions of masculinity and femininity.

On the development in women's studies, Nira Yuval-Davis, who is the director of a postgraduate course in the UK in gender and ethnic studies, comments that, 'in Britain we still have a long way to go. One of the consequences of the existence of separate courses for "Women's Studies" and courses for "Gender and Development" is an inherent assumption that Third World women or women from postcolonial countries constitute altogether different categories of women from other "normal" women. For me it was very important to bring people together in this course – women (and some men), from the UK and from other countries in the Third World and in Europe, representing both majorities and minorities. By doing so, it is possible to look at their differential positioning as a pedagogic tool of understanding analytically what is at issue when one is talking about diversity and situated knowledge.'

## BLACK FEMINISM AND THE ONE MILLION MEN MARCH

bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis are not only students of social inequalities, both are also engaged in political movements aimed at combating these inequalities. If the history of emancipation movements teaches us anything, it is that there are no 'natural' alliances between members of

different movements. Separatist movements within movements, especially women organizing along feminist issues, have been the cause of much unease. Black women organizing separately did not meet with much sympathy from either the black movement or the white women's movement. It was precisely this lack of interest in their experiences from both the black movement and white women's movement that led black women to organize separately. We asked bell hooks how the relationship between the black movement and black feminism is today.

Behind this question was the One Million Men March of 16 October 1995, organized by Black Muslim activist Louis Farrakhan in the USA and which excluded women. Farrakhan is the leader of Nation of Islam, a black social movement whose political programme includes a demand for a separate black state and is radically opposed to integration. In an interview, Farrakhan called Hitler 'a very great man'; in a speech noted for its anti-Semitism, he described Judaism as 'a gutter religion'. In that 1985 speech, 'A Warning to the Jews', he claims that it is black people and not the Jews who are God's real chosen people (see Kepel, 1997). The march was a highly controversial political event and generated much debate among black men and women. Angela Davis wrote a letter of protest. Many black males also stated they did not subscribe to Farrakhan's black nationalism, but still joined the march because they wanted to show black men are willing and capable to take responsibility for their families.

This One Million Men March thus raises all sort of questions about how gender issues in the USA are tackled by the black movement. Does the One Million Men March mean that the American ultra-right appeal to morality and family values is finding a following in the black movement? Are black men responding to the feminist appeal for more sensitivity in males? Or should we see the march as an act of resistance to racist images of black men as irresponsible and unwilling to accept their family responsibilities? Or is it an appeal to the American government to enable black men – through steady jobs and incomes – to take on their responsibilities? We asked bell hooks how we are to understand this One Million Men March.

'For me,' she replies, 'the march highlighted that we have not done our work, we have failed to educate people on what feminist thinking is about. I oppose the march, not because I'm opposed to black men getting together with other black men and not with black women. My opposition is to the principles under which they organize. The problem of the rhetoric of the march was that this image of black men obfuscated the fact that the values of the march are the values of Christian fundamentalism and the march was of course deeply anti-feminist.'

'It is important that people recognize that Islam in America doesn't begin with Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, that there are many different

branches. There is a wonderful book, *Afro American Islam*, that tries to remind people that black people embraced this religion long before Farrakhan. It is even part of the colonized mind, to make it seem that Farrakhan represents Islam. That is not so. He represents one particular branch of Islam, the version that is pro-capitalism, pro-imperialism, and pro-war. The values of the march had much more in common even with anti-Semitism, which is a fundamental dimension of the Christian right. If you pick up any right-wing Christian literature, the anti-black racism is always coupled with anti-Semitism. So in that sense Farrakhan seemed to me an appropriate leader to emerge at this time because he has the support of the white Christian right, because the values he is propagating are completely in tune with the values of the white Christian right.

'When I tried to talk with people, and when I would say the march was patriarchal, what made me sad was that people did not understand what we mean by "patriarchal". Because once again the image of the march which evolved was that of the down-trodden black man who has no power over his life. So how do you link that image to the reality of black men and domestic households, men who are quite capable of asserting power over women and children, even if they have no economic power? I found the march a deeply anti-feminist backlash, and it was indeed an attack on black women. As Angela Davis was one of the most outspoken people about the march, she was crucified in many black communities. This is a woman who has always fought for racial justice, who put her life on the line, and people were willing to wipe her off, write off all she has done. I found that so deeply troubling and disturbing. She gave a talk in Harlem with Castro, and many people heckled her, did not want to hear her political arguments because opposition to the One Million Men March was perceived yet again as a betrayal of the race.

'I kept saying that I had no difficulty if black men were organizing on the basis of progressive politics. I believe that the struggle for freedom by black people everywhere on the planet has to have a feminist dimension. If black men were saying "all women stay home, because we want to make our voices heard around the world, as people who want to liberate women, children and men", that would have been wonderful. But the fact is that it was not anti-patriarchal; it was not anti-racism. It was about fascism.'

#### BEYOND IDENTITY POLITICS: (DIS)CONNECTING RACE, CLASS AND OTHER IDENTITIES

In recent years the black movement has developed from a civil rights movement to an identity-based movement. A similar development has occurred in the women's movement: it was civil rights oriented in its first

wave; the second wave is concerned primarily with identity. Identity politics takes as its starting point the view – also known as ‘standpoint theory’ – that social identities do matter, also in a positive way. It claims that every social group is socially located and our social location provides us with specific knowledge about the world and leads to specific experiences that are constitutive for who we are: we all come from somewhere and we speak from somewhere. Social location produces certain collective identities. These identities are not considered a handicap, but function as a resource, particularly for marginalized groups. The knowledge and experiences gained from the structural location as marginalized groups are considered valuable for social movements in that they can serve as a basis for organization. Identity politics has incorporated these notions about structural location and identity into its organizational principles. An example of a political movement that is based on identity politics is the Rainbow Coalition, led by Jesse Jackson. The name expresses the movement’s aim of trying to bring together different groups; the rainbow consists of many ‘colours’, women, blacks, gays and lesbians. Each constitutes a separate identity that reflects experiences of marginalization that are not easily accessible to others. Oppressed knowledge is sometimes also considered as superior knowledge.

A discussion of this theoretical position on knowledge is to be found in Patricia Hill Collins’s (1991) *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Both bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis refer to this work in conversation, but both have a different reading. The conceptualization of identity described above carries in it the danger that it essentializes identity into a pre-given category, already there, waiting to be discovered. On the other hand, the argument that is often raised against a postmodern notion of identity as a socially constituted identity is that it hampers political organization. To build up a movement, so runs the argument, one needs a fixed identity; a socially constituted identity is very nice for academics to play with, but hardly meshes with political reality.

Because both bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis attach great value to the collective experience of groups, it is hardly surprising neither relates to civil rights politics. However, as their theoretical position is that of postmodern writers that problematize the ‘naturalness’ of social identities, neither does relate to identity politics. When we asked if they could explain ‘how a postmodernist view on identity can be combined with political struggle, a political movement’, both produced different answers.

‘For the United States,’ bell hooks states, ‘I would say that it is a failure of a larger political language. We see people going back to essentialist notions of identity, because they do not want to really embrace a political language like “colonization”. It is much easier for people to talk about gay



rights or black struggle than it is to use words like colonization; identity becomes something that is easy for everybody to understand. In the US identity is very much encapsulated in a notion of liberal individualism and white individual soul. If any oppressed group wants to assert its need for emancipation, the best way to get the dominant group to listen is to appeal to the question of individual rights, which takes people back to identity.'

According to bell hooks, in fighting social inequalities we should not stress individual rights, but address the matter in terms of intertwining social structures. She finds it particularly disturbing that 'class' seems to be disappearing from our political vocabulary: 'For example, when we talk about patriarchy, we talk about patriarchal structures *within* other types of structures. But the fact is that for all of us it is becoming more difficult to use a political language. It seems to me that race or ethnicity and gender do not allow us to really talk meaningfully about the status of "women". My status as a black woman, an upper-class black woman professional is not the same as the status of a black working-class woman or a black woman on welfare, who doesn't have a PhD, etc. There exists a fear of any kind of political language that would openly require us not to let go of identity, but in a sense to keep identity in perspective. It is meaningful for me to see my blackness as connected to that of other black people. At the same time, it is meaningful for me to understand in a larger way the impact of class and nationality. It seems to me that there is a great reluctance on the part of people in the US to embrace a more complex understanding of who we are and how we function as citizens.

'One of the aspects of the march that was very disturbing', she believes, 'was that it was fundamentally anti-welfare, but no one was really dealing with what we are going to do if masses of women and children don't have access to housing or health care. And there are no husbands with jobs, because in fact there is a massive unemployment problem. When I opposed the march – and I went around to different universities – young black men would stand up during my talk and say things to me like: "Shouldn't we be anti-welfare, shouldn't we want to take care of our families?" I would say to them: "Do you know the unemployment statistics? That even if every black man went out today looking for a job, he would not be able to find a job." And then there was the assumption that men who work will somehow automatically provide for their families. I felt for the first time a tragic sense of political naivete, that many people had no sense of how their country functions. They really believe there are jobs for everybody, that it is just a matter of individual will; all you have to do is go out and you'll get work. They appear not to understand how capitalism functions, believing it gives everybody equal access to wealth.'

bell hooks is clearly uneasy about the seeming return of young blacks to

a liberal vocabulary, a vocabulary that ignores the fact that social opportunity is not evenly distributed, but also means the intellectual legacy of the black civil rights movement is lost to them. She points out the paradox of how easily the concept of identity can be incorporated into a notion of liberal individualism and an individual rights idiom. It is also clear that her idea of postmodernism still includes a notion of structures like class or patriarchy that generate social inequality. Nira Yuval-Davis takes issue with bell hooks' notion of patriarchy.

'I don't like the notion of patriarchy,' Yuval-Davis says, 'because it does not locate oppression but rather homogenizes all men and all women. Especially for me, coming from the Middle East, it is even more problematic because the meaning of patriarchy has a very different meaning there to that found in the writings of western feminists. The notion of patriarchy there, unlike in most western feminist writings, acknowledges that the rule of the father (pater) applies to young men as well as women. Going back to the question of identity, what we are really talking about here is the story or, rather, stories that we tell ourselves and others about who we are. And it is important in this context to differentiate between the individual level of identity and the collective level – these are related stories but they are not identical, as identity politics would have us believe. In identity politics people present their personal stories as if they represent those of everyone in that social category; that is very one-dimensional and homogenizing. It is important to retain notions of difference without equating deconstruction of categories with depoliticization. This is what I try to do with the notion of transversal politics. And my reading of Patricia Hill Collins is that she is talking exactly about the same thing. There is a difference between Rainbow Coalition politics and transversal politics. The first is based on an alliance of different identity groupings, which are perceived to be essentially different and internally homogeneous. Transversal coalition politics recognizes and appreciates the importance of the differential positioning of the different participants in the dialogue, but they are not perceived as representing the whole category of identity, so differences of class, race, sexuality or stage in the life cycle are not being repressed.'

bell hooks intervenes here: 'But that is exactly what Patricia Hill Collins does. Her thinking is rooted in a very nationalist understanding of black women (i.e. as Afro-American women). She does not talk about other groups of women within that framework.' Nira Yuval-Davis disagrees: 'She talks about the fact that when you speak from a specific positioning, you speak about unfinished knowledge, not invalid knowledge. I think that this distinction is very important and represents the basis of transversal politics. I say this because it makes us realize that we see the world rather differently, depending on our situated positioning. And she very much promotes the notion of dialogue, which is not based on the question

of category. It is not that your message is unaffected by your positioning. It is rather that, as she puts it, what is important is the message rather than the messenger.' Hence, what ultimately counts for Nira Yuval-Davis is not who does the speaking, but what we are speaking about.

bell hooks responds by saying: 'Excuse me, isn't her book called "Black Feminist Thought"? Right there is the very identity politics that you oppose. If you do a reading of her text it is very much rooted in a construction of collective black identity. Part of what I want to say is that there is no collective black identity, and part of what black Americans do not want to deal with is class, and the degree to which class mediates blackness. Most books by black Americans on race tend to act as if there is a collective black identity unmediated by class, while there is a growing class division among black people. Practically all the literature on blackness is written by privileged black people on black people who are without privilege. This means we are always the interpreters of a class position of which many of us have no first-hand experience. That is not to say we have to know it, but we have to be honest about the standpoint from which we are approaching it. You see a growing discourse that isolates race as the topic, but not class. This is because people in the US are fundamentally conservative when it comes to left politics and to any kind of discourse that brings in class. That discourse calls us all into question, it calls those of us, black people, who are highly privileged into question, when we try to evoke a narrative of black identity that is based exclusively on race, ethnicity.'

To summarize bell hooks' position then, she considers 'black' as a real, existing and unitary category, but one that is fractured by class divisions and can as such never be a homogenizing category. Nira Yuval-Davis, while also very much concerned with social divisions and inequalities, including that of class, wants to further radicalize the postmodern notion that social categories do exist, but are constantly in the making and do not refer back to some underlying system that produces certain locations and separate identities. Hence, we are bound to ask how different categories come into being, how they are related and how we can account for their social constitution in political practices.

## BOUNDARIES WITHIN OR BEYOND BOUNDARIES

'In developing a new kind of politics,' Nira Yuval-Davis argues, 'we shouldn't go back to the old universalistic trap, which was very ethnocentric, but at the same time we have to avoid the trap of relativism, of the kind of identity politics which completely separates social categories. What I'm saying is that we should recognize our mutual differences, but at the same time transcend identity categories. That is not only the

question of black identity but of all identities and different classes. We have to deal with what lies beyond the boundaries of ethnic categories, with what constitutes those categories, and not just with divisions within the boundaries of racial or ethnic categories. And that it is not only a question of how to make a better black politics in itself, but how to make a better class politics, a better anti-racist politics, a better feminist politics. That's why I also have a big problem with *the* notion of hybrid politics currently so popular, because in a way it brings in essentialism through the back door. In order to have hybridity, you must have two separate cultures, which are mixed. These cultures are constructed as coherent and non-contested. Yet cultures are a very fluid, heterogeneous and contradictory resource, out of which different ethnic projects select what suits their purpose, just as they use whatever economic and political resources they have. The same cultural resource – for instance the Bible, can be used for opposite ethnic or political projects – for and against family planning, and different cultural resources – the Bible, the New Testament or the Koran – can be used for a compatible political project of people who belong to different collectivities.'

bell hooks considers this position as 'academism' that fails to recognize how identities are played out in 'real' political life. hooks interjects: 'I was thinking concretely about public policy, though. This is to me one of the clashes between the kind of theory that is being made in academia and the reality of shaping public policy. When people come to public policy, in fact people do deal with these notions of collective identities, so it is very difficult when we say: let's critique these identity politics. When you come to the level of public policy how do you deal then with locations of specific groups? This is why I tried to think about Gayatri Spivak's (Spivak, 1988) attempt to talk about strategic essentialism – because there are things that are specific to what it is to be black and female in the USA. How do you deal within a larger understanding of progressive politics, of gender and ethnicity and class, when there are in fact specific things that affect black females that affect no other group in the same way? How do you talk about that in a way that does not reaffirm flat notions of identity politics? It seems to me that that is the challenge that we face.'

Nira Yuval-Davis understands the challenge and responds: 'Identity politics very often collapse issues of discrimination and issues of disadvantage. The non-differentiation between them could lead to backlash. When you are talking about discrimination you are talking about a specific grouping, which is being discriminated against, and there is a need to devise policies which would deal specifically with issues of discrimination. However, when you are discussing issues of disadvantage, they concern also people who are not members of the group which is discriminated against. On the other hand, they would often also be, as a result of institutionalized racism, represented disproportionately among

the disadvantaged. This is why they would also benefit disproportionately from general policies which are aimed at tackling disadvantage, as long as these policies were not discriminatory.'

bell hooks is not at all satisfied: 'In the USA we have public policy in place that addresses issues in general terms. Here we have a welfare system in place that was designed for white women primarily; there was no concept of women of colour initially when welfare was being created in the US. So here you have something designed for a general population, the good of women in general. If you look at it now, you see that the way it has trickled down to other populations doesn't work. So I don't think one can have simply public policy that is general.'

### ON THE RIGHT SCENT

To illustrate that in real life all sorts of identity politics are active, bell hooks comes up with an anecdote about a bottle of perfume she bought and that caused an allergic reaction. Although the store was legally obliged to take it back because all perfumes sold in the USA have to be adequately tested for allergic reactions, she was reluctant to go to the shop herself, knowing that she as a black woman might not be believed. She sent her white assistant instead. 'Again,' she concludes 'there is a general policy, a general principle that affects everybody in the same way. But that principle has to be carried out on an individual level by people who respond to those very limited constructions of identity that we are talking about. I send my white assistant to do things like that; the fact of her identity will mediate her capacity to get the desired result. So I myself am much more interested in questions of how identity functions in everyday life for people. That is why I think identity politics has had so much for so many people.'

'But here you are homogenizing a whole category', Nira Yuval-Davis exclaims. 'The fact that black people may have more difficulty negotiating these things than white people is true as a generalization. But to translate this generalization to an individual level as a causality which is absolute – that your assistant, for no other reason than because she is white, irrespective of her age, class or personality, would find it easier than you would because you are black – does not take into account many other factors which could affect the specific situation given the specific people involved.'

'That is a misunderstanding on your part about how white supremacy functions in the US,' bell hooks objects, 'because people of colour in the US are like the colonized. A black person who works in a store would be much more likely to give this service to a white person of any class because of their own colonized mind relating to white supremacy. You

see, white supremacy isn't based on our skin colour; that is why I don't believe I will have solidarity with a black person simply based on their skin colour.'

But Nira Yuval-Davis won't give up: 'You once spoke at the Black Book Fair in London about whiteness and Gus Jones (a known black British activist) was in the audience. You talked about whiteness from your positioning as a black girl growing up in the American South and you talked about your fear of white people. Gus Jones was absolutely furious. In the discussion after the meeting he said that when his father came to London from the West Indies in the 1950s, he was not afraid of whites. This was after he had fought in the British army in the Second World War. For him, the way you were describing the relationship between blacks and whites just perpetuated stereotypical myths which could only strengthen the notion of white supremacy. I told Gus that both he and you were generalizing a specific historical positioning – his father in London of the 1950s, you as a girl in the South of the USA in the 1950s – as if it represents ahistorically what the relationships between blacks and whites are all about. That is what you did just now again and that is my problem.'

'The point that I am trying to make', bell hooks concludes, 'is that you cannot simply dismiss an identity politics because at a concrete level of struggle in everyday life people fall back on it again and again. Any of us who dismisses that, dismisses the experiential reality of people in everyday life as a position from which we can theorize or can attain agency in our lives. So while I want to critique identity politics, I do not feel that I want to dismiss it as completely irrelevant to a question of struggle. That is the point I want to make.'

#### UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS OPPRESSION: RACISM OR WHITE SUPREMACY?

In some European countries a considerable proportion of the immigrant population is of Islamic background. In the Netherlands, for example, Islam appears to be the point of crystallization of both the public debate around ethnic minorities and on actual ethnic conflicts. For many, Islam is synonymous with backwardness, people clinging to tradition and therefore totally unfit for modern life. It is generally considered as a religion that is oppressive to women – as in France, the Netherlands too has its own issues relating to the headscarf. Part of the UK's immigrant population is also of Islamic background and considerable anti-Islamic sentiment became apparent in the wake of the Rushdie affair. Nira Yuval-Davis is no stranger to these realities. We asked her which *conceptual framework* she would use to analyse anti-Islamic sentiments and

anti-Islamic discriminatory practices. Is this a form of racism, with culture or religion as its focus – in anti-racist theory in the Netherlands is this common practice? If so, what consequences does this have for our notion of racism, for our notion of race and for the organizational basis of political struggle against racism? And we asked bell hooks for a response based on her American experience, where religious oppression is hardly thematized as a form of racism.

‘Although every notion of racism always has a notion of embodiment – how the Other looks – and of course skin colour is absolutely central’, Nira Yuval-Davis replies. ‘This is not all what racism is about. There are two ultimate logics of racism. One is that of exploitation – in its ultimate logic it is slavery – and the other is exclusion, which in its ultimate manifestation is genocide. But in reality these two forms of racism have always at least partly overlapped in concrete historical situations. And any ethnic signifier of boundaries, which could be physical appearance but also an accent or a way of dressing, can become a signifier for racism, which can operate in one of these two logics, exploitation or genocide. In concrete historical situations racism can operate in many ways. I have recently completed a research project with Max Silverman on racialized discourses on Arabs and Jews in Britain and France and it is very clear how many different discourses operate in each country, how the two countries also differ from each other and how the recent history of the European Union, for instance, has also affected the nature of these racialized discourses. Going back to your question I have a very inclusive definition of racism.’

We asked bell hooks for her view. The discussion then takes on a quite other direction, because hooks considers the very term ‘racism’ as a counterproductive concept. ‘I prefer the term white supremacy to racism,’ bell hooks responds, ‘because I feel strongly that people who are victimized by racism can also hold white supremacy beliefs and assumptions. To me, the term “racism” always takes us back to the essentialist notions of victim and oppressor, and not a broader notion that in fact we can *all* hold white supremacist beliefs and assumptions and enact them in daily life, irrespective of whether or not we are victims of racism. To me, anti-Islamic sentiments, for example, are a manifestation of white supremacy. These sentiments are often held by people of colour as well as white people, so are not based on an evocation of Muslims as darker people, but rather are rooted in fundamental notions about who are God’s chosen people and the like. But in general, in all my work I prefer white supremacy, because I am interested in people of colour. I am interested in looking at how we enact systems of white supremacy, whether white people oppress us or not.’

Nira Yuval-Davis then asks, ‘But do you think there can be racism against whites?’ bell hooks replies: ‘I know of no institutionalized forms



of racism against white people in the US.' 'What would you call anti-Semitism in the US?', Yuval-Davis then asks. 'Would you call that analytically racism or not?' bell hooks replies: 'I would first call it white supremacy, but I think also of the Jews who colluded in those forms of thinking.' Yuval-Davis is not convinced: "'White supremacy" centres on a notion of whiteness. It is very ethnocentric to construct all racisms in terms of white and blacks, while in anti-Semitism there was no notion of whiteness at all. Whiteness is present in some or rather many specific historical contexts of specific racisms, but not in all cases.' Now hooks is unimpressed: 'It seems to me that you confuse whiteness with white supremacy, which is not the same thing.'

bell hooks continues, 'I prefer to talk about white supremacy rather than racism, because to me racism is only one of the manifestations of white supremacy, not the only one. A lot of the work I have been trying to do in the US is about the decolonization of black people in everyday life. It does not have to do with the presence of white people, with the interaction with a white majority. It has to do with what happens in our segregated neighbourhoods, where you still have the values of white supremacy, in what we think is beautiful and so on. You can't eradicate all that by talking about white people, whiteness in that way. We have to talk about the ideology of white supremacy as it permeates different levels of our lives, of our aesthetics, whether whiteness is present or not, because I don't think white supremacy equals white people. I find it interesting that people keep wanting to bring it back to white people, rather than western metaphysical dualism and that kind of ways of thinking.'

'Then why not call it "western dualism"?', Nira Yuval-Davis asks. 'Because to me that is not a political term', bell hooks says in response. 'White supremacy is a political term on the planet. If you go anywhere and you talk about white supremacy, people have some sense that they understand what you mean. The concept of white supremacy allows for a broader understanding of the multiple ways that racism may manifest itself, in different cultures, among different groups. Whereas if you say "racism" in the US, people immediately think: "black and white". If you say "white supremacy" they immediately think more globally, because most Americans don't associate it with America, they associate it with South Africa, Nazi Germany, all these other locations. The term that I most use in my work is "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" precisely because I don't want to act as if white supremacy is the only form of domination on the planet that matters in people's lives. For me racism is not the word that broadens the discussion, because when you talk about racism it makes it very hard to have in that an understanding of how we reproduce certain forms of white supremacy among ourselves, in the absence of a dominant group that is white.'

Nira Yuval-Davis tries to summarize and differentiate: 'What you are



saying is that white supremacy is not just about racism, it also encompasses the whole political economy, it is about power relations around the globe, and I agree with you up to that point. But this is when we talk about present historical conditions and even in contemporary terms it is misleading and ethnocentric to assume that all the contemporary struggles around the globe on issues of political economy are just on issues relating to white supremacy. In any case this has to be differentiated from the analytical category of what is racism. When we define what is racism we cannot identify it with a very particular historical phenomenon and sometimes you have to look beyond the division between white and black.'

bell hooks says: 'I feel I do that, but in a different way to how you would; that is not to say that I don't conceptualize beyond black and white. I never use the word "white" isolated from the concept of supremacy, because I think that would in fact reify whiteness as the key element. It is referring to the whole notion of the Other. How do we construct the Other globally? What is the logic of Otherness globally? It challenges the very notion that there is such a thing as white culture. Instead it does talk about the symbolic structuring of white supremacy as an ideology that is spread around the globe. What I am actually saying is that there are many forms of racism and that they alter through history and part of why I choose the term "white supremacy" is that it does not allow us to become fixated on a particular form and say: "this is it, this is how it operates".'

It would seem to us, the – somewhat dazzled – interviewers, that here the analysis of the problem is the same for both bell hooks and Nira Yuval-Davis. In contrast, the solution chosen by each is dramatically different. While bell hooks prefers the concept 'white supremacy' to underline 'the colonized mind', Yuval-Davis prefers the notion of 'racism'. In her opinion racism focuses not exclusively on 'race', but racism may take religious and cultural differences as well as its symbolic markers.

Time was running out, and we had to stop in mid-discussion. We had been privileged to see a glimpse of knowledge-in-process on race, ethnicity, class and gender. This insight, it is clear, is anything but easy to gain.

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